

Tuesday, Mar 3, 2009

Posted on Wed, Nov. 19, 2008

Fort Mill schools consider requiring defensive driving class for students who park

FORT MILL -- Fort Mill's high schools soon could require students who want to park on campus to take and pass a defensive driving course.

Brooke Russell, executive director of the South Carolina chapter of the National Safety Council, told the Fort Mill school board this about Alive at 25, a defensive driving and early intervention program that already has been piloted at Fort Mill High School.

"It's about educating the community and educating young adults," Russell said. "It's a collaboration of the community to save lives."

Car crashes are the No. 1 cause of death among 16- to 24-year-olds, Russell said. The NSC began offering Alive at 25 in South Carolina in February 2007. So far, 10,000 young adults have taken the 4 1/2-hour course. Of those, one later died in a crash.

"Statistically, we should have had 10 (fatalities)," Russell said. "One out of every 1,000 teens is killed in car wrecks."

Off-duty law enforcement officers teach the course and go through extensive training to learn how to teach it. Thirty-five law enforcement agencies in the state, including the York County Sheriff's Office, Fort Mill Police Department, York County coroner and solicitor, are working with NSC on the program. Also, 21 high schools across the state are using the program, either on a mandatory or voluntary basis, Russell said.

Earlier this year, Fort Mill High School set up a pilot class to try the Alive at 25 program with Fort Mill school resource officer Millie Little. Twenty-two students took the course on a Saturday. At the end, all the students were asked to fill out an anonymous survey and all of them rated the class positively.

"Every school needs this class," read the comments on one of the surveys Little shared with the board.

The program comes with a \$35 per-student fee that includes the price of a booklet. Some of that money is used to offset the cost of the program for other students who can't afford the fee, Russell said. School board members were asked to consider requiring Alive at 25 for all students who drive to school. A maximum of 30 students would be allowed in each class.

One suggestion, from one of students in Little's class, was to waive the \$70 parking permit fee the high schools charge students for the year they take the course. Students who don't drive to campus would not be required to take the course, but it would still be open to them.

Marty McGinn, the district's director of secondary education, said she would have a detailed plan to include Alive at 25 at Fort Mill and Nation Ford high schools for the board to study in January or February. Because so many students would need to take the course, McGinn said it would need to be phased in over a couple of years.

During the school year, Alive at 25 sessions would be held on Saturdays, but several sessions could be offered during the week in the summer months, McGinn said.

Board member Patrick White asked if anything could be done to set up more sessions between now and when the board adopts the program officially, if it chooses to do so.

Fort Mill High Principal Dee Christopher, who also attended the meeting, said both high schools were ready to set up Alive at 25 classes now. Russell said another session will be set up by the end of this week.

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